

I Scream

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I get a restless feeling on Sunday afternoons if I'm just sitting around. I feel like I'm supposed to be doing something, although I've noticed that just sitting around feels to me more and more like doing something as I age. Even looking out of the window seems like an activity now. Which it is if you compare it to, say, sleep. Or tv.

But about Sundays. After noon. Sunday afternoons my internal clock, which was set when the Gruen watch company was still in business and before quartz gizmos took most of the fun out of timepieces, that internal clock tells me I should be in a car going someplace. This is not the case with my wife, who comes from a more refined background. Her internal clock tells her on Sunday afternoon that she should be lying down. Not under the covers, of course. On top of the bedspread with just a little something thrown over the lower limbs, which makes it a nap. I'm not sure whether a nap is more active or more virtuous than looking out the window, but I'm pretty sure she thinks it's one of those.

I feel like I should be going someplace on Sunday afternoons because when, I was a boy, that is when Dad, who drove, which Mother didn't, seemed to think it was ok to finally stop hiding out at his place of business and resume his search for ice cream. The reason he hid out at his place of business on weekends while more normal dads were playing catch with and sorting out life for their freckled sturdy sons was because there was no place to hide in the very small house he had bought when Truman was president and where now there were an ungodly large bunch of children, all of them his, none of them freckled. Sturdy though. We're all still around. And we still get on his nerves even though he's ninety.

That huge number of kids that made it impossible for him to relax under his own roof was. I would like to point out again, since I'm at a safe distance from him - and he's still kind of violent - even at ninety-, that army of kids, mostly boys, were his handiwork so to speak. But in those distant times, before fathers became part of the birth process -and let us note here - because we can - that this whole business of fathers in the delivery room. a bullet most of you dodged, may have less to do with bonding with those surprisingly slippery little new arrivals than it does with making it clear that there will be no distant dads anymore - I say in those distant times, it was ok to be, well. distant.

The thing about distant fatherhood besides not being right there in the thick of things in the delivery room with a clean pair of cable cutters to take care of that umbilical cord is that you didn't have to explain yourself to your children. You just did pretty much what you wanted to. Since I was there with the cable cutters for the arrival of both my daughters, I'm part of a generation of men who do in fact have to explain themselves. All the time. To their children. So that if I had been seized with the urge to push back the chair after the Sunday roast we actually affected for several years and said "everybody into the car", having in mind a trip to Chillicothe to check out the historic markers, I would have had to explain not only where we were going but why we were going there and why it would be more interesting than whatever ... And I would have been overruled.

But it was different for my father and his epic Sunday afternoon trips to nowhere. You weren't supposed to ask him where we were going. I don't know why. It might have been because if he did tell where he was thinking about heading and if Mother, who was always pretty glad to get out of the house for a while and who was generally good **natured** anyway, if she actually knew where this hypothetical target was, she might try to talk him out of it. Because the truth was often pretty frightening. I told you this had to do with the eternal search for ice cream. Not only ice cream. Dad was looking for the perfect ice cream in the perfect ice cream parlor. That would be something with an awning and overhead fans and low low prices. And peach ice cream made from fresh local peaches.

He was after a unicorn. A will o'the wisp. An illusion. Remember this was in the days before big multinational ice cream chains had even been thought of. But it was also well after the time there was much of a living to be made off of an ice cream parlor. TV, air conditioning, and postwar suburban sprawl had laid waste to already marginal ice cream businesses like the black death. Everybody had upgraded from the icebox to a refrigerator with a freezer so they could get ice cream from the new supermarkets and stick it next to the frozen peas. Mostly what there was in the interregnum between hand-made local dairy ice cream and those self-promoting jackasses Ben and Jerry was the Dairy Queen and the **Tastee Freez**. Which wasn't what he was looking for.

He didn't want the ice cream for us. It was for him. He thought - and still thinks - that ice cream is the perfect food, even though ice cream and something called Michigan cherries wiped his teeth out by his mid fifties. And he assumed that we all agreed. Me, I can take it or leave it. I usually leave it. But ice cream was what I took him for his birthday a couple of months ago. Packed up by **Graeters** who know all about his kind. What was memorable about the **pre-interstate** highway search for ice cream was that Dad wasn't just motoring around what the Tribune referred to as greater **Chicagoland** - a one or two hour trip that would get all seven children only mildly carsick and stir-crazy. No. Dad was looking in other states. Places like Iowa and Wisconsin. Little towns on the Mississippi with names **that** he thought sounded nice. Maybe he had read about them in the paper. There was only one way to get to the elusive ice cream parlor and that was through 800 miles **of mesmerizingly** unvarying fields **of Lester Pfister hybrid** corn.

No. I tell a lie. Some of the **fields** were Pioneer brand hybrid corn. And I guess to be fair, I have to admit that some of the **fields** were soybeans. But they were all the bleakest landscape an eight year old could ever hope to see.

These were summer drives, gentlemen. Before air conditioning had made it down to the Ford and Plymouth wagons necessary for a family of nine. Seat belts no more than a gleam in Ralph **Nader's** beady eyes. Windows open - the smell of **Lester Pfister** and Pioneer hybrid corn in the air, the rhythmic **whap** of molten asphalt expansion joints on the **pre-radial** balloon tires. Tension so thick in the car you could knead it like dough as seven kids wondered if Dad, the man with the Iron Bladder, was ever going to pull over at a Sinclair station. Something he didn't like to do. Not just because he was inconsiderate but because a delay like that would almost certainly mean that you would arrive in **Dubuque just** as the legendary Decker & Neville Soda **Shoppe** closed its doors. Possibly forever. And he wouldn't get his peach ice cream and it would be usually my fault because I had had to pee two hours ago back in the exquisitely named town of **Peotone**. Which, by the way, you weren't allowed to laugh about because it might hurt the feelings of the **Peotoners** and also showed that your mind was in the gutter.

I only remember one ice cream parlor that was actually open, and that was in Burlington, Wisconsin, which by some miracle was only two hours away. I think we went back there twice. We in the back seat thought that the soda **shoppe** was sort of dopey. We were always the only people in there, and the ice cream cone decorations on the gloomy charcoal grey walls looked to have been the work of the owner's talentless sister. And there was that two hour return ride to think about. Bud Dad thought it was worth the trip.

The only fond memory I have of those trips is the time Dad lined us all up to aim our youthful weapons at a rock wall below Ulysses Grant's house in Galena, Illinois, the last chance to pee for four or five hours. It's a good looking house, and U.S. Grant might have adjusted his bourbon levels against that very stone wall on an evening walk. So the way I handle that restless feeling when it hits on a Sunday is to go to the bathroom until it passes.